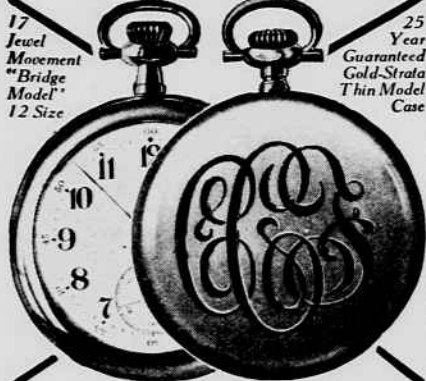


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little pang as he advanced to meet them. "So you have really come!" she exclaimed. "You astonish me!" "Why not?" he answered. "You are here. To me, you know, that was almost as astonishing."

"Ah, no!" she objected. "Everyone tells me that I ought to have been doing this sort of thing for a long time. It is my métier to be frivolous. It is scarcely yours, is it?"

Gerald was busy collecting his party, and for these few minutes they were alone.

"Something has happened, Sybil," Jermyn said quietly.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her feet were keeping time to the music. She was wearing a wonderful gown, unlike anything he had ever seen on her before, and her maid was following behind with a little bag containing her domino and mask.

"Nothing has happened, dear Jermyn," she assured him; "only I think that I am growing to feel younger. I am afraid of gray hairs, sitting by myself and moping all day long. Don't you think I am wise?"

"But isn't it a little—sudden?" he asked.

"Ah! these changes are always sudden," she replied.

"It is a change, then?" he said swiftly.

"Sybil, is anything changed between you and me?"

For a moment she was her old self. "Not while the world lasts, dear one," she murmured. "And yet—and yet—"

"If you will only finish your sentence," he begged, "I feel that I shall have the answer to a little riddle that is puzzling me sorely."

"My sentence," she whispered, "is better unfinished. Now here comes everybody, and I know you're going to hate it all."

Sybil's words were prophetic. Supper was served at a great round table in the middle of the restaurant. Jermyn was placed at some distance from Sybil, between Mrs. Levenden and an exceedingly lively young woman of American extraction, who was appearing in a popular musical comedy, and to whom he was apparently expected to devote himself. Jermyn had never heard the name of the show in which she was performing, and she had never heard of Jermyn. After the first few sentences conversation fell flat.

IT was indeed a rather difficult situation for him. Everybody called everybody else by their Christian name, and a peculiar sort of freemasonry seemed to exist among them all and to form the foundation for the conversation. Jermyn did his best at first to talk to his neighbors; but he found the task almost hopeless. They belonged to a different world, and they spoke a different tongue. Even their manners were strange to him. As time went on everyone became riotously gay. Sybil, between Gerald and one of his particular cronies, was altogether the center of attraction. Her laugh was continually heard. She talked with everyone, she even whispered sometimes to Gerald.

Gradually Jermyn began to feel as though he was a skeleton at the feast. Mrs. Levenden, who outside her intimate knowledge of the stage was rather a stupid woman, had given up trying to make conversation with him. The American beauty at his right was engaged now in a desperate flirtation with a young compatriot a few places away. Magnum after magnum of champagne had been opened; the table was hung with tobacco smoke. Several of the men, and even one or two of the girls, were making quite as much noise as was seemly.

A maître d'hôtel had brought in a huge box of crackers, and Sybil, amid applause, had placed upon her head a little vivandière's cap. Someone drank her health. She stood up and kissed her hands across the table to him. Suddenly, almost for the first time, she caught Jermyn's eye. For a single moment it seemed to him as though a mask had fallen from her face, as though her little glance was an imploring one, as though she were calling to him to take her away, that it was all a bad dream, that some evil spirit had taken possession of her. Her message came to him with such convincing earnestness that he rose to his feet before he could realize what he was doing. Then, as swiftly as it had come, the look passed away. She was once more the gayest of those present, laughing with everybody, the presiding deity of the feast.

When at last they rose Jermyn with difficulty made his way to her side. Her face was a little flushed; she looked up at him, as he came, with a quiver almost of apprehension. "Sybil," he pleaded, "don't go to this dance. Let me drive you home."

Again she seemed to hesitate; the mask slipped. Then Gerald came up and swept her away.

"You're in box number five, Sir," he told Jermyn, "with Miss Cluley and me; but she's engaged to me for the ride down. We are going to try my new coupé. There are



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